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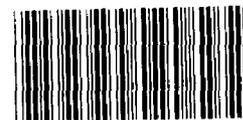
## Report To The Postmaster General

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# Postal Service Needs Stricter Control Over Employee Absences

Postal Service management emphasizes absence control, but to make the program more effective, the Service needs to

- monitor unscheduled absences,
- consolidate absence control responsibilities at the facility level,
- establish standards for identifying employees with potential attendance problems, and
- ensure that disciplinary actions are timely and progressively severe.



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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

GENERAL GOVERNMENT  
DIVISION

B-204164

The Honorable William F. Bolger  
Postmaster General

Dear Mr. Bolger:

This report discloses the extent to which Postal Service employees are not available for work and suggests ways to strengthen control over unscheduled absences. It contains recommendations to you on page 15.

As you know, section 236 of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 requires the head of a Federal agency to submit a written statement on actions taken on our recommendations to the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs and the House Committee on Government Operations not later than 60 days after the date of the report and to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations with the agency's first request for appropriations made more than 60 days after the date of the report.

Copies of the report are being sent to the above congressional committees as well as others who have an interest in postal activities. Copies are also being sent to the Director, Office of Management and Budget.

Your continued receptiveness to our recommendations is very much appreciated.

Sincerely yours,

*W. J. Anderson*

William J. Anderson  
Director



D I G E S T

Despite Postal Service emphasis on controlling unscheduled employee absences, supervisors are generally ineffective in dealing with the problem. They do not keep good records and fail to identify numerous employees who have attendance problems.

Postal employees, like employees of other Federal agencies, earn and are paid for annual and sick leave, holiday leave, and other leave including time away from work caused by a job-related injury.

At three large post offices, GAO found that time away from work averaged about 50 days a year per employee. (See p. 4.) About 40 days were paid absences at an annual cost of \$3,000 per employee or \$84.5 million (4,350 workyears) at the three locations. The other 10 days were unpaid absences. (See p. 5.)

Absence control is emphasized by postal management and the paid leave rate of 40 days is comparable to the rate experienced by other Federal agencies. GAO wanted to learn about leave usage of postal employees and to determine if more could be done to decrease unscheduled absenteeism which increases labor costs and disrupts operations. About 85 cents of every \$1 available to the Postal Service is spent on labor.

GAO found that the total extent of unscheduled absences--about 20 percent of total absences--was not being monitored by management. (See p. 9.) Responsibility for controlling employee absences and for ensuring that employees work as scheduled was placed with firstline supervisors. They do not maintain adequate records and fail to identify employees with attendance problems.

From a randomly selected sample of 967 employees, GAO, using criteria which post office officials from the offices visited agreed with, identified 313 employees with attendance problems--108 of the 313 employees had been disciplined for poor attendance. On the basis of sample results, GAO estimates, with a confidence level of 95 percent, that at least 6,400 and possibly as many as 11,000 of the 28,600 employees at the Chicago, Dallas, and Philadelphia Post Offices had potential attendance problems. (See p. 11.) GAO found that disciplinary actions taken against employees with attendance problems were not always timely or progressively severe. (See p. 13.) This is not to say that all employees identified as having attendance problems should have been disciplined.

Employee absences, particularly unscheduled absences, are costly and disruptive to postal operations. Improved absence control will result in lower operating costs as illustrated by the results realized from actions taken by the Philadelphia Post Office to strengthen its absence control program. Reduced sick leave usage contributed to an estimated annual reduction of \$2.2 million in overtime cost. (See p. 7.)

#### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE POSTMASTER GENERAL

To strengthen controls over employee absences, the Postal Service needs to

- establish procedures to monitor the extent of unscheduled absences,
- consolidate absence control responsibilities at the facility level,
- establish standards for identifying employees with potential attendance problems, and
- ensure that necessary disciplinary actions are timely and progressively severe. (See p. 15.)

AGENCY COMMENTS

The Postal Service recognizes the need for improved absence controls and informed GAO of planned actions to bring about a more effective control program. (See p. 15.)



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ABBREVIATIONS

AWOL	Absence without leave
GAO	General Accounting Office
GPO	Government Printing Office
LWOP	Leave without pay

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The United States Postal Service has about 650,000 career employees 1/ working at over 30,000 facilities located throughout the United States. Management employees, including Postmasters, total about 78,000. Most of the remaining 572,000 are craft employees working in clerk, mailhandler, and carrier positions. Personnel compensation and benefits for fiscal year 1980 totaled \$16.5 billion or 85 cents of every \$1 spent by the Postal Service.

As indicated by the above numbers, the Postal Service is a labor-intensive organization, and having the necessary employees available for work when scheduled is of critical importance in controlling labor costs and in maintaining service standards. Postal employees, like employees of other Federal agencies, earn and are paid for annual and sick leave, holiday leave, and other leave including time away from work caused by a job-related injury. The amount and use of leave by postal craft employees is governed by collective bargaining agreements.

POSTAL EMPLOYEES EARN AND ARE PAID FOR TIME AWAY FROM WORK

Annual Leave

The Postal Service authorizes annual leave to its employees for rest and recreation and for personal and emergency purposes. Employees earn annual leave on the basis of their years of service as shown below.

<u>Years of service</u>	<u>Hours per pay period</u>	<u>Days per year</u>
Less than 3	4	13
3 to 15	6	20
15 or more	8	26

Unused annual leave of 30 days or less may be carried over from year to year by bargaining unit employees.

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1/"Career" positions include all those filled by a career appointment, either full time or part time.

### Sick Leave

Sick leave is intended to protect employees' income when they are incapacitated due to sickness or injury. Employees are expected to accumulate their sick leave to sustain them in the event of a serious medical problem. Accordingly, employees are allowed to accumulate unlimited hours of sick leave.

Full-time employees, regardless of length of service, earn 13 days of sick leave each year; unused sick leave is carried over from year to year.

### Holiday Leave

Postal Service employees can be paid for nine holidays each year.

### Continuation of Pay

In accordance with the Postal Service Reorganization Act, Postal Service employees are covered by the Federal Employees' Compensation Act. Under the latter act, employees who suffer traumatic job-related injuries are entitled to have their regular pay continued for a maximum of 45 calendar days while they are disabled.

### Other Leave

Other leave paid for by the Postal Service includes training, court, military, and administrative leave. Court leave is authorized for public service as a juror or as a witness in a nonofficial capacity on behalf of a State or local government. Military leave is authorized for service as a member of the National Guard or Armed Forces Reserves. Administrative leave is authorized for reasons such as civil disorders, civil defense, or acts of God.

### ABSENCES FOR WHICH NO PAY IS RECEIVED

An unpaid absence can be either authorized or unauthorized. Leave without pay (LWOP) is an authorized absence from regularly scheduled work. Leave without pay may be authorized upon request normally when an employee has exhausted his/her appropriate leave balance.

Absence without leave (AWOL) is an unauthorized absence from regularly scheduled work. Absence without leave may be imposed when an employee does not obtain authorization in advance for an absence or does not report for work after denial of leave.

## OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

We undertook this review to determine how the Postal Service could increase the availability of its work force during scheduled work hours and to identify the consequences of employee absences. Our review was conducted at Postal Service headquarters, Washington, D.C.; Central Region headquarters and the Chicago Post Office, Chicago, Illinois; Southern Region headquarters, Memphis, Tennessee, and the Dallas Post Office, Dallas, Texas; the Eastern Region headquarters and the Philadelphia Post Office, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. We also obtained leave usage data from (1) the Office of Personnel Management, (2) the Government Printing Office (GPO), and (3) private corporations located in the metropolitan areas of the post offices selected for review.

We reviewed Postal Service leave policies and operating practices to determine the controls over absenteeism; payroll summary reports and management operating data to determine how often employees are absent from scheduled work and the consequences of such absences; and leave and disciplinary records to determine leave balances, fiscal year 1980 leave usage, and disciplinary actions taken to control absences.

We selected a sample of employees from the payroll register at each post office for review of personnel and leave records. We stratified the universe of postal employees on the registers to determine whether employees with sick leave balances of 25 hours or less were less available for work than those with higher sick leave balances. We randomly selected for review at each post office the records of at least 50 employees with sick leave balances of 25 hours or less and at least 250 employees with sick leave balances of more than 25 hours. In projecting our sample we used stratified sampling methodology to determine significance at the 95 percent confidence level, with a sampling error of  $\pm 8.14$  percent.

Using the selected employees' fiscal year 1980 leave records and criteria which post office officials from the offices visited agree with, we identified employees who had attendance problems. (See app. II.) By reviewing the post office's disciplinary records, we determined whether supervisors had imposed timely and progressively severe discipline on the employees identified. Also, we discussed with the appropriate supervisors situations where we had identified employees who had attendance problems but either received no disciplinary action or the action taken appeared to be untimely or not progressively severe.

Our review was performed in accordance with the principles outlined in the current "Standards for Audits of Governmental Organizations, Programs, Activities, and Functions."

CHAPTER 2

EMPLOYEE ABSENCES

EXTENT AND EFFECT ON POSTAL OPERATIONS

At the three locations visited, time away from work averaged about 50 days a year per employee. About 40 of these days were paid absences at a cost of about \$3,000 per employee or \$84.5 million for 4,350 workyears at the three locations. The other 10 days were unpaid absences. Our analysis of employee absences in fiscal year 1980 at the Chicago, Dallas, and Philadelphia Post Offices is summarized below and detailed in appendixes III, IV, and V.

<u>Description</u>	<u>BASIC</u>		<u>Average</u> <u>days per</u> <u>employee</u>	<u>COST</u>	
	<u>workyears</u>			<u>Amount</u> <u>Percent</u>	
	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>		--(millions)---	
Straight time	22,636	80.6	209.5	\$ 439.5	83.9
Absences					
Paid	4,350	15.5	40.2	84.5	16.1
Unpaid	<u>1,109</u>	<u>3.9</u>	<u>10.3</u>	-	-
Total absences	<u>5,459</u>	<u>19.4</u>	<u>50.5</u>	<u>84.5</u>	<u>16.1</u>
Total	<u>a/28,095</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>260.0</u>	\$ <u>524.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>

a/See note a on page 16.

PAID ABSENCES BY TYPE

<u>Type of</u> <u>absence</u>	<u>BASIC</u>		<u>Average</u> <u>days per</u> <u>employee</u>	<u>COST</u>	
	<u>workyears</u>			<u>Amount</u> <u>Percent</u>	
	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>		--(millions)---	
Annual leave	2,292	8.2	21.2	\$ 44.5	8.5
Sick leave	1,005	3.6	9.3	19.5	3.7
Holiday leave	859	3.1	7.9	16.6	3.2
Continuation of pay	66	.2	.6	1.3	.2
Other	<u>128</u>	<u>.4</u>	<u>1.2</u>	<u>2.6</u>	<u>.5</u>
Total	<u>4,350</u>	<u>15.5</u>	<u>40.2</u>	\$ <u>84.5</u>	<u>16.1</u>

### UNPAID ABSENCES

<u>Reason</u>	<u>Basic workyears</u>		<u>Average days per employee</u>
	<u>Number</u>	<u>percent</u>	
Disapproved absence (AWOL)	117	.4	1.1
Sick	200	.7	1.8
Suspensions	126	.5	1.2
Injury on duty (note a)	234	.8	2.2
Other (note b)	<u>432</u>	<u>1.5</u>	<u>4.0</u>
Total	<u>1,109</u>	<u>3.9</u>	<u>10.3</u>

a/Employees are receiving workers compensation benefits.

b/Includes personal time, maternity leave, and pending time for removal actions.

As indicated above, time away from work (paid and unpaid) during a workyear of 260 days averaged about 50 days for each employee at the Chicago, Dallas, and Philadelphia Post Offices. The paid leave rate (40 days) is comparable to the rate experienced by other Federal agencies but, in total, postal employees are away from work more than employees of the GPO--a Federal agency, like the Postal Service, which has a production-oriented operation. During fiscal year 1980, GPO employee absences averaged about 45 days--39.5 days paid and 5.4 unpaid. Information on unpaid absences of employees of other Federal agencies was not available for comparative purposes. (See app. VI.)

### EFFECT OF ABSENCES

The most visible effect of employee absences is cost--salary for earned leave taken and overtime incurred to replace absent employees.

#### Paid Absences

As shown on page 4, the cost of paid absences at the three locations during fiscal year 1980 was about \$84.5 million. About 30 of the 40 days per employee were for personal reasons (annual and sick leave) at a cost of \$64 million (\$2,300 per employee). Employees earn and are expected to take annual leave for vacations and other personal time and sick leave when they are legitimately ill.

The use of sick leave for each employee averaged about 9 days per year with the Philadelphia Post Office having the highest usage--over 11 days. (See app. IV.) Postal employees earn 13 days of sick leave each year. Thus, they used about 70 percent of their earned sick leave at an annual cost of about \$700 per employee.

As indicated earlier, employees earn 13, 20 or 26 days of annual leave per year based upon their years of service. Information provided by the Postal Service indicates that there are approximately 270,000 bargaining unit employees who earn 20 days of leave per year and another 230,000 who earn 26 days of leave per year. Existing collective bargaining agreements provide employees with certain rights to use annual leave.

Overtime Cost

The Postal Service uses overtime to cover fluctuations in workload and to replace absent employees. Replacing absent employees with regular full-time employees on their scheduled non-workdays substantially increases costs. We could not, however, determine total overtime cost caused by employee absences.

To demonstrate that employee absences increase overtime cost, we analyzed the use of overtime by letter carriers in Chicago and Philadelphia. As shown below, for fiscal year 1980 these post offices used 295 workyears of overtime to replace absent letter carriers.

<u>Post Office</u>	<u>Estimated workyears</u>	<u>Estimated cost</u> (millions)
Chicago	191	\$ 5.5
Philadelphia	<u>104</u>	<u>3.0</u>
Total	<u>295</u>	\$ <u>8.5</u>

Postal Service records do not disclose the type of absence which caused the replacement overtime. However, an analysis of carrier absences during fiscal year 1980 indicates that replacement overtime was caused by the following types of absences.

<u>Types of absence</u>	<u>Chicago</u>		<u>Philadelphia</u>	
	<u>Estimated workyears</u>	<u>Estimated cost (millions)</u>	<u>Estimated workyears</u>	<u>Estimated cost (millions)</u>
Annual leave	95	\$ 2.7	57	\$ 1.7
Sick leave	40	1.2	27	.8
Unpaid absences	42	1.2	15	.4
Other leave	6	.2	4	.1
Continuation of pay	<u>8</u>	<u>.2</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>-</u>
Total	<u>a/191</u>	<u>a/\$ 5.5</u>	<u>a/104</u>	<u>a/\$ 3.0</u>

a/Prorated on the basis of fiscal year 1980 workyears for each type of absence taken by carriers.

As stated previously, employees earn and are expected to take annual leave for vacations and sick leave when they are legitimately ill. Overtime resulting from the use of such leave cannot be avoided. However, our projection shows that unpaid absences at the Chicago and Philadelphia Offices resulted in overtime of 57 workyears at a premium cost of 50 percent or about \$530,000 during fiscal year 1980. Generally, such absences are incurred by employees with poor work habits.

Overtime usage reduced by emphasis on absence control

The relationship between absenteeism and overtime is well illustrated by the results realized from actions taken by the Philadelphia Post Office to strengthen its absence control program. Starting in January 1981, emphasis on absence control resulted in reducing sick leave during the period February 22 to September 5, 1981, by about 15 percent or 61,480 hours when compared with the same period in 1980. For the same periods, overtime was reduced by 15 percent or about 88,000 hours. On an annual basis, we estimated that overtime cost was reduced by \$2.2 million after increased emphasis on absence control which involved

- reminding firstline supervisors of their responsibilities for absence control, and
- having the Employee and Labor Relations Department monitor leave usage by work

station and obtain explanations of poor work habits from supervisors.

Another Effect

Mail processing is a 7-day, 24-hours a day (3 tour) operation which tends to be disrupted by excessive absenteeism.

At the beginning of a mail processing tour, supervisors have condition reports and a staffing schedule for use in determining the volume and priority of mail to be processed and the work force available. Staffing schedules are prepared without information on the number of employees who are not going to report for work as scheduled (i.e. unscheduled absences).

Our analysis of staffing of the Mail Processing Division of the Chicago Post Office showed a significant number of employees had unscheduled absences. For the period August 9 through October 3, 1980, about 93 percent of the scheduled craft employees reported for work as shown in the following schedule.

<u>Description</u>	<u>Number of employees</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Worked	3,863	93
Absent	<u>292</u>	<u>7</u>
Total	<u>4,155</u>	<u>100</u>

It would seem that the absence of 7 percent of the scheduled work force should have had some adverse effects on operations. We learned that low-priority mail may not be processed as soon as desired but, other than overtime, we could not quantify significant effects.

### CHAPTER 3

#### CONTROLS OVER EMPLOYEE ABSENCES

##### NEED TO BE STRENGTHENED

To strengthen controls over absenteeism, particularly unscheduled absences, the Postal Service needs to

- monitor unscheduled absences,
- consolidate absence control responsibilities at the facility level,
- establish standards for identifying employees with attendance problems, and
- ensure that disciplinary actions are timely and progressively severe.

##### UNSCHEDULED ABSENTEEISM SHOULD BE MONITORED .

Absences which have not been arranged for in advance disrupt postal operations and increase the use of overtime hours. The Postal Service's absence control program emphasizes control of unscheduled absences, but goals for measuring program performance have not been established and the extent of unscheduled absenteeism is not reported to management. Two of the three regions visited (Central and Southern) had established sick leave usage goals. We found, however, that monitoring the use of sick leave does not provide adequate control over unscheduled absences because of extensive occurrence of unpaid absences not arranged for in advance and unscheduled annual leave.

At the Chicago Post Office, our analysis of leave usage indicated, as shown below, that 20 percent of absences were unscheduled.

<u>Types of absences</u>	<u>Workyears</u>					
	<u>Total</u>		<u>Scheduled</u>		<u>Unscheduled</u>	
	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Annual leave	1,238	50.8	1,143	92.3	95	7.7
Sick leave	499	20.4	303	60.8	196	39.2
Unpaid absence	<u>702</u>	28.8	<u>498</u>	71.0	<u>204</u>	29.0
Total	<u>2,439</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>1,944</u>	<u>79.7</u>	<u>495</u>	<u>20.3</u>

It should be noted that monitoring the use of sick leave which is a significant cost item would capture only 40 percent of the unscheduled absenteeism at the Chicago Post Office and that such absenteeism is probably more disruptive to postal operations than scheduled sick leave.

An indication of the cost of unscheduled absenteeism is provided by an analysis of letter carrier overtime at the Chicago Post Office. Of the 191 workyears of letter carrier overtime (see p. 6), 177 were projected as replacement time for employees on annual, sick, and unpaid leave. We estimate that 17 of the 177 workyears resulted from unscheduled absences and increased costs by about \$450,000.

Management reports from the payroll system do not provide information on unscheduled absences. Such information is provided by employees' leave request forms but is not coded for management reporting purposes.

We found, however, that some station managers and tour superintendents maintain informal control records showing whether employees' use of leave was scheduled or unscheduled. We tested the informal control records maintained by one station manager and found that the records were not being effectively used to identify employees with attendance problems. The 54 employee control records reviewed showed that supervisors had not notified 15 of the employees of their attendance problems.

#### OTHER WEAKNESSES IN THE ABSENCE CONTROL PROGRAM

The Postal Service's absence control program could also be made more effective by

- consolidating control responsibilities at the facility level,
- establishing standards for identifying employees with potential attendance problems, and
- ensuring that disciplinary actions are timely and progressively severe.

The Service's control program is guided by the principle that management has an inherent right to expect that employees maintain assigned work schedules. Responsibility for controlling employee attendance and for ensuring that employees work as scheduled is placed with firstline supervisors. We found that such supervisors, as a group, are not effective managers of the absence control program.

Supervisors do not maintain adequate records of employee absences

Supervisors did not always accurately prepare and maintain employees' leave requests and absence analyses. Program instructions require that supervisors prepare and maintain employees' Requests for and Notifications of Absence (form 3971) and Employees' Absence Analyses (form 3972).

Poor preparation and maintenance of records was most evident at the Dallas Post Office. We found that supervisors did not always prepare the required records and when they did, they made mistakes and did not keep the records updated. Because of the condition of the Dallas Post Office leave records, we were unable to completely review the fiscal year 1980 leave records of 50 percent of the 302 randomly selected employees. Several of the leave requests examined did not show the number of hours requested, and some requests for absences were not properly dated or signed and usually did not explain the reason or justification for the request.

Also, requests for absences could not always be located if supervisors or craft employees had transferred extensively among various job locations. For example, when the Director of Mail Processing instructed a supervisor to obtain one of the sampled employee's leave requests for our review, she furnished us the requests from May through September 1980 but could not locate those from October 1979 through April 1980. Upon inquiry, the employee's current supervisor indicated he did not know how to locate them. The supervisor speculated that the unlocated leave requests are probably stored in the files of some supervisor who does not know that they should be forwarded to the current supervisor.

Employees with attendance problems not identified

The Postal Service has not established uniform standards for identifying employees with attendance problems. Each of the post offices reviewed used informal standards to identify such employees, but the standards were not consistent within each post office nor among the post offices reviewed. (See app. II.)

From our randomly selected sample of 967 employees at the three locations visited, we identified, using criteria which post office officials from the offices visited agreed with, 313 employees with attendance problems--108 of the 313 employees had been disciplined for poor attendance. On the basis of our sample results, we estimate, with a 95 percent confidence level, that at least 6,414 and possibly as many as 11,068 of the 28,582 Chicago, Dallas, and Philadelphia Post Office employees had attendance problems. (See app. I.)

One of the reasons supervisors do not identify employees with attendance problems is because of numerous changes in assignments (employees and supervisors).

A typical example is a Chicago Post Office mailhandler, with more than 30 years of service, who in June 1980 had a sick leave balance of only 21 hours. According to his leave records, the employees' 272 hours of absences during 1980 were approved by 8 different supervisors. Since 1972 this employee's sick leave usage averaged 120 hours annually. The supervisor who approved the employee's last 2 requests for 48 unscheduled sick leave hours was not aware of his prior unscheduled use of sick leave nor of his low sick leave balance.

At the Dallas Post Office almost 20 percent of the craft employees selected in June 1980 as our sample group had changes in their assignments by November. We noted one instance where 14 different supervisors approved one mailhandler's leave within a 9-month period. A common explanation offered by supervisors for not identifying employees with attendance problems was the "fresh start" approach. Under this approach, new supervisors discuss employees' past attendance with them and outline attendance expectations. The supervisor then evaluates the employees attendance from the date of the fresh start. We were told by one of the supervisors that he uses the fresh start approach because he must have firsthand knowledge of the circumstances surrounding each absence to evaluate an employee's attendance.

An illustration of the fresh start approach follows.

A Dallas Post Office city carrier with more than 10 years of service in June 1980 had a sick leave balance of only 20 hours (sick leave usage averaged more than 100 hours annually since 1970). His leave records show that he was absent 30 times (226 hours) during fiscal year 1980. Annual and sick leave consisted primarily of 1 and 2 day absences usually before or after scheduled nonworkdays or holidays. Nine of the 30 absences occurred before March 1980 when a new manager was assigned to the station. The station manager discussed the employee's attendance with him and outlined future expectations.

In discussion, the manager told us he targeted the employee "as one to watch," and in May 1980 after 9 additional absences he placed him on leave restriction. However, despite 12 additional absences during the remainder of the fiscal year the manager took no disciplinary action against the employee.

Disciplinary action not timely  
or progressively severe

Supervisors are expected to maintain an absence analysis to profile each employee's attendance pattern and to discipline employees for poor attendance. The Service's absence control program stresses that discipline which includes letters of warning, suspensions, and removal must be timely and progressively severe. To determine if disciplinary actions were being taken as expected, we reviewed records for 108 employees with attendance problems. We judged the disciplinary actions taken against 44 of these employees as either untimely or not progressively severe as illustrated by the following examples.

Case A

A Chicago Post Office clerk with 7 years of service had a sick leave balance of 16 hours in June 1980. According to the records, the employee submitted 64 leave requests to at least 13 different supervisors during fiscal year 1980, as tabulated below.

<u>Type of leave</u>	<u>Number of requests</u>	<u>Hours</u>	
		<u>Total</u>	<u>Unscheduled</u>
Annual	23	86	14
Sick leave	21	197	144
Unpaid			
Approved	9	367	32
Disapproved	<u>11</u>	<u>35</u>	<u>35</u>
Total	<u>64</u>	<u>685</u>	<u>225</u>

From April 1975 through October 1980, supervisors disciplined this employee on 16 occasions--14 for unapproved absences or poor attendance and 2 for conduct. The disciplinary actions included five letters of warning, one emergency suspension, two 5-day, two 7-day, three 10-day, and three 14-day suspensions. Under the region's concept of progressively severe discipline, Chicago supervisors should initiate removal action after a 5-day, a 10-day, and two 14-day suspensions. In October 1979, a grievance decision reduced the employee's second 14-day suspension to 10 days. Because of this reduction, the supervisor in February 1980 again suspended the employee for 14 days to conform with the progressively severe concept even though she believed the current unscheduled absence and his past attendance record warranted removal action. In January 1981, the supervisor again suspended the employee for another 14 days after management suggested that

extending his break period for 13 minutes did not warrant her proposed removal action. Consequently, the Chicago Post Office continued to employ a clerk who was unavailable for work for 85 days during fiscal year 1980 and who had been disciplined an average of almost 3 times annually for more than 5 years.

#### Case B

A Dallas Post Office clerk with 9 years of service had a sick leave balance of 32 hours in June 1980. In fiscal year 1980, the employee was absent about 237 hours. From July 1979 through January 1981, she had 12 tardies and 17 sick or emergency annual leave absences of 1 or 2 days each (8 of them preceding or following nonscheduled workdays or holidays). She was not, however, issued a letter of warning until January 1981. In commenting on the supervisor's request for leave restriction and letter of warning, a management official noted the employee's persistent tardiness problem and expressed wonderment as to why discipline was delayed so long.

#### Case C

A Philadelphia Post Office clerk with 10 years of service had a sick leave balance of 22 hours in August 1980. According to the Postal Service records, she was absent about 291 hours in fiscal year 1980, including 139 unscheduled sick leave hours. This employee received a letter of warning in May and was suspended for 7 days in September 1978 for poor attendance. In 1979 and again in 1980 the employee received letters of warning for poor attendance. Letters of warning following a suspension cannot, in our opinion, be considered progressively severe discipline.

#### CONCLUSIONS

We recognize that supervisors must be allowed to exercise discretion in dealing with employees and that a set of rules (i.e. a cookbook approach) will not ensure effective management of a work force. We found, however, that supervisors generally are not effective in controlling absences. They do not keep good records and fail to identify numerous employees with attendance problems. These tasks are made more difficult by frequent work location changes (employees and supervisors).

We believe that absence control could be strengthened by the adoption of standards for identifying employees with attendance problems and by assigning identification and monitoring responsibilities to an absence control office. Such an office could keep supervisors informed about potential attendance problems and flag disciplinary actions which appear to be untimely or not progressively severe for followup action by management. We discussed the establishment of identification standards with

local union officials who agreed that such standards would (1) make employees more aware of management's attendance expectations and (2) minimize inconsistent supervisor decisions.

In view of the magnitude of unscheduled absenteeism and the effect of such absences on postal operations and cost, we believe that the Postal Service should establish performance goals for controlling unscheduled absences and have payroll reports show management the extent of such absences. Unscheduled annual, sick, or unpaid leave have similar effects on postal operations and cost.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE POSTMASTER GENERAL

To strengthen the absence control program, we recommend that the Postmaster General require that standards for identifying attendance problems be established and that identification and monitoring responsibilities be placed with a control office at large postal facilities. The control office should notify supervisors of employees with potential attendance problems and ensure that disciplinary actions are timely and progressively severe.

We also recommend that the Postmaster General direct that performance goals for controlling unscheduled absenteeism be established and that management reports on leave usage be supplemented with information showing the extent of unscheduled absenteeism.

#### AGENCY COMMENTS

In commenting on our draft report, the Postmaster General informed us of planned actions to bring about a more effective absence control program. He said that plans are under way to develop a nationally directed attendance control program which includes examining the feasibility of more extensive reporting and tracking procedures for unscheduled absences.

The Service believes as we do that the involvement of firstline supervision is critical in absence control and in determining appropriate disciplinary action based upon individual circumstances. While not diminishing the firstline supervisors responsibility for controlling absences, the Service envisions having a more structured and centrally managed program that will provide a facility-level review of attendance control, possible goal setting, and active assistance to firstline supervisors in exercising their responsibilities. (See app. VII.)

STATISTICAL PROJECTION OF  
POSTAL SERVICE EMPLOYEES WITH  
ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS

	<u>Chicago</u>	<u>Dallas</u>	<u>Philadelphia</u>	<u>Total</u>
Universe of employees	15,703	5,075	7,804	<u>a/28,582</u>
Sample size	340	302	325	967
Employees in sample with attendance problems	106	80	127	313
Estimated number of employees in universe with attendance problems	4,372	1,270	3,099	<u>b/8,741</u>
Range				
Maximum	5,102	1,506	3,505	11,068
Minimum	3,642	1,034	2,693	6,414

a/The universe of 28,582 employees exceeds the total workyears of 28,095 on page 4 because the universe includes employees who did not work full time during fiscal year 1980. Workyears were computed by dividing total payroll hours by 2,080.

b/Stratified sampling methodology was used in computing estimates. The range shows the maximum and minimum values at the 95 percent confidence level. The range represents a sampling error of  $\pm 2,327$ .

CRITERIA FOR IDENTIFYING EMPLOYEES  
WITH ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS

The following criteria, generally accepted by management officials of the post offices reviewed, were used to identify employees with attendance problems.

Chicago:

- One disapproved unpaid absence of at least 8 hours.
- Five tardies within 90 days.
- Three unscheduled absences within 30 days and total unscheduled absences of 24 hours within 90 days.

Dallas:

- One disapproved unpaid absence of at least 8 hours
- Ten or more sick days in 1 or 2 day increments.
- Any combination of sick, emergency annual, or unpaid absences before or after scheduled nonworkdays or holidays; 3 within 4 pay periods, 4 within 8 pay periods, or 5 in a fiscal year.
- Six approved or two disapproved tardies.

Philadelphia:

- One disapproved unpaid absence of at least 8 hours.
- Five tardies, part day unpaid absences, or sick leave (within a 6-month period).

PAID AND UNPAID ABSENCES IN CHICAGO, DALLAS, AND  
PHILADELPHIA POST OFFICES FOR FISCAL YEAR 1980

	<u>Basic workyears</u>	<u>Average days per employee</u>	<u>Cost (millions)</u>
<b>Paid absences</b>			
Chicago	2,305	39.1	\$44.8
Dallas	738	38.9	14.2
Philadelphia	<u>1,307</u>	<u>43.4</u>	<u>25.5</u>
Total	<u>4,350</u>	<u>a/40.2</u>	<u>\$84.5</u>
<b>Unpaid absences</b>			
Chicago	702	11.9	
Dallas	126	6.6	
Philadelphia	<u>281</u>	<u>9.3</u>	
Total	<u>1,109</u>	<u>a/10.3</u>	(b)
Total	<u>5,459</u>	<u>50.5</u>	\$ <u>84.5</u>

a/Used total workyears to compute this average.

b/Employees accrue paid benefits if the unpaid absences were less than a full pay period.

TYPES OF PAID ABSENCES IN CHICAGO, DALLAS, AND  
PHILADELPHIA POST OFFICES FOR FISCAL YEAR 1980

Annual leave	<u>Basic workyears</u>	<u>Average days per employee</u>	<u>Cost</u> (millions)
Chicago	1,238	21.0	\$ 24.1
Dallas	391	20.6	7.5
Philadelphia	<u>663</u>	<u>22.0</u>	<u>12.9</u>
Total	<u>2,292</u>	<u>21.2</u>	<u>\$ 44.5</u>
 Sick leave			
Chicago	499	8.5	\$9.7
Dallas	166	8.7	3.2
Philadelphia	<u>340</u>	<u>11.3</u>	<u>6.6</u>
Total	<u>1,005</u>	<u>9.3</u>	<u>\$ 19.5</u>
 Holiday leave			
Chicago	466	7.9	\$ 9.0
Dallas	152	8.0	2.9
Philadelphia	<u>241</u>	<u>8.0</u>	<u>4.7</u>
Total	<u>859</u>	<u>7.9</u>	<u>16.6</u>
 Continuation of pay			
Chicago	43	.7	\$ .8
Dallas	9	.5	.2
Philadelphia	<u>14</u>	<u>.5</u>	<u>.3</u>
Total	<u>66</u>	<u>.6</u>	<u>\$ 1.3</u>
 Other			
Chicago	59	1.0	\$ 1.2
Dallas	20	1.1	.4
Philadelphia	<u>49</u>	<u>1.6</u>	<u>1.0</u>
Total	<u>128</u>	<u>1.2</u>	<u>\$ 2.6</u>
Total	<u>4,350</u>	<u>40.2</u>	<u>\$ 84.5</u>

UNPAID ABSENCES IN CHICAGO, DALLAS, AND  
PHILADELPHIA POST OFFICES FOR FISCAL YEAR 1980

	<u>Basic workyears</u>	<u>Average days per employee</u>
Sick		
Chicago	46	.8
Dallas	22	1.2
Philadelphia	<u>117</u>	<u>3.9</u>
Total	<u>a/200</u>	<u>1.8</u>
AWOL		
Chicago	103	1.7
Dallas	7	.4
Philadelphia	<u>21</u>	<u>.7</u>
Total	<u>a/117</u>	<u>1.1</u>
Suspensions		
Chicago	103	1.7
Dallas	12	.6
Philadelphia	<u>18</u>	<u>.6</u>
Total	<u>a/126</u>	<u>1.2</u>
Injury on duty		
Chicago	192	3.3
Dallas	16	.8
Philadelphia	<u>48</u>	<u>1.6</u>
Total	<u>a/234</u>	<u>2.2</u>
Other		
Chicago	258	4.4
Dallas	69	3.6
Philadelphia	<u>76</u>	<u>2.5</u>
Total	<u>a/432</u>	<u>4.0</u>
Total	<u>1,109</u>	<u>10.3</u>

a/This figure is the statistical combined estimate for the three locations; thus, it is a weighted figure rather than the sum of the workyears.

COMPARATIVE ANNUAL AVERAGE  
DAYS OF EMPLOYEE ABSENCES

	<u>Period</u>	<u>Paid Leave</u>				<u>Total</u>	<u>Unpaid absences</u>	<u>Total absences</u>
		<u>Annual</u>	<u>Sick</u>	<u>Holiday</u>	<u>Administrative</u>			
U.S. Government:								
Executive branch	calendar year 1978	19.9	8.5	8.7	1.7	38.8	(a)	38.8
	calendar year 1977	19.8	9.3	7.9	1.4	38.4	(a)	38.4
Postal Service	calendar year 1978	21.6	9.1	7.4	1.9	40.0	(a)	40.0
	calendar year 1977	22.3	9.2	7.2	1.9	40.6	(a)	40.6
Chicago, Dallas and Philadelphia Post Offices	fiscal year 1980	21.2	9.3	7.9	1.8	40.2	10.3	50.5
Government Printing Office	fiscal year 1980	18.3	10.3	b/9.6	1.3	39.5	b/5.4	44.9

a/Data not available.

b/For calendar year 1980.



THE POSTMASTER GENERAL  
Washington, DC 20260-0010

April 8, 1982

Dear Mr. Anderson:

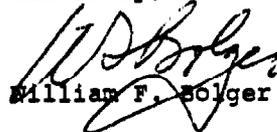
Thank you for the opportunity to comment on your draft report, "Postal Service Needs Stricter Control Over Employee Absences."

The Postal Service has recognized the need for more effective absence controls, and plans are under way to develop a nationally directed attendance-control program. We will examine the feasibility of more extensive reporting and tracking procedures for unscheduled absences and have also begun discussions with the unions to explore possible areas for a joint approach to attendance-control matters.

We believe the involvement of first-line supervision is critical in absence control and in determining appropriate disciplinary action based upon individual circumstances. We will do nothing to diminish the first-line supervisor's responsibility for controlling absences and will not issue a "cookbook" set of rules that will relieve him of the need to use good judgment in identifying and disciplining employees with attendance problems. However, we do envision a more structured and centrally managed program that will provide a facility-level review of attendance control, possible goal setting, and active assistance to first-line supervisors in exercising their responsibilities.

We believe this approach will bring about the more effective absence-control program which your report recommends.

Sincerely,

  
William F. Bolger

Mr. William J. Anderson  
Director  
General Government Division  
U.S. General Accounting Office  
Washington, D. C. 20548

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